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SUBJECT: PAKISTAN GENERAL ELECTIONS CALLED FOR JANUARY 8

REF: ISLAMABAD 4890

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Chief Election Commissioner Justice (retd) Qazi Muhammad Farooq announced November 20 that Pakistan will hold general elections for the National and Provincial Assemblies on January 8, 2008. Opposition parties were quick to question the credibility of elections under the current state of emergency. End summary.

¶2. (U) Chief Election Commissioner Justice (retd) Qazi Muhammad Farooq called Pakistan's general elections for January 8, 2008. All 342 National Assembly seats will be filled -- 272 are directly contested districts and 70 are reserved for women and specific minority groups. Party candidates will contest a total of 728 seats in the Provincial Assemblies of Punjab, Sindh, Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan.

¶3. (U) Farooq also announced November 20 the election timetable. Pakistan's Election Commission (ECP) will accept nomination papers up to November 26, will then scrutinize candidates to confirm their eligibility, and will issue the final list of candidates on December 16.

¶4. (U) In his November 20 remarks, Farooq assured the Pakistani public that these general elections would be "transparent in every respect." He requested political parties' cooperation. Lastly, Farooq said Pakistan welcomed international observers.

¶5. (U) Opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was the first to react publicly to Farooq's election timetable. PML-N Information Secretary Ahsan Iqbal called the election announcement "a fraud."

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He questioned how campaigns were to go forward with opposition leaders jailed, under house arrest, or exiled. PML-N Chairperson Raja Zafarul Haq held out the possibility that his party would boycott the elections if held under a state of emergency.

¶6. (SBU) Meanwhile, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Spokesman Farhatullah Babar stated that his party had yet to decide if they would contest elections under emergency restrictions. He added that the PPP hoped to consult with other opposition parties. Other opposition parties withheld public comments, echoing PPP's line that they had yet to review, consult or decide on the matter. Most of these other parties have indicated privately to EmbOffs that they too will likely stand for elections, with Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) the possible exception.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Today's announcement of the electoral schedule poses a dilemma for the opposition. Some of them clearly want to

boycott the elections, while others appear willing to contest elections that they simultaneously complain are unfair. Most of the opposition parties will wait for the PPP's decision. End comment.

PATTERSON